

## When Heaven Came Down

Genesis 28:10-22

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Good evening everyone. It's really great to be with you. And I'd like to invite you to turn with me in your Bibles to Genesis 28. Genesis 28. As we're going to read from verses 10 through to verses 22. It's a very well-known passage of Scripture. And of course it's part of the summer series: Great Old Testament Stories and the Gospel of Grace. And it's a wonderful account of the provision of free grace that God has and has displayed so wonderfully in this passage.

### The Background to Genesis 28

Just as you're turning there, or as you're taking up your pamphlets, let me just give you a few of the events that formed the backdrop to this passage in Genesis 28. You'll remember that the covenant line—God has ordained that the covenant line go through Abraham on to Isaac. And, of course, David Felker dealt with part of that just last week. And from Isaac it was to go down to the next in line, Isaac's next of kin. And, of course, we're told that Isaac prayed for his wife Rebekah, that God would open her womb. And they were blessed, not just with one child, but with two children, twins in actual fact. And, of course, we know their names as Jacob and Esau. And a lot of us will be able to remember some of the details even as we hear their names of the account that takes place. And right from the outset we need to recognize that God had said to Rebekah that the older will serve the younger. The older will serve the younger. In other words, Jacob, the second born, was the one through whom the covenant blessings would continue. And as we read in the chapters that follow after that that there are some interesting family dynamics that ensue. Isaac prefers Esau. Maybe he's the man's man, the hunter, the outdoorsman. Maybe he's just given preference to him. On top of that we have Rebekah who favors the other son, Jacob. He's more of a homeboy. Some commentators will say he was more like a "mommy's boy," actually, because at 77 he eventually leaves the home because he's fleeing from his life from Esau. And so, perhaps, that's where they get the name and the term from.

Now, let me just say, you know, from a human perspective, when we read about Jacob enticing Esau to give him his birthright for a plate of red stew or lentil stew or whatever it may have been it kind of takes us by surprise that God would lay

his hand on a man such as this. And then we read a little bit further on that Jacob goes on to kiss and lie and steal the covenant blessings from his own father. And we kind of think, “Did God get this right?” Jacob’s story from my perspective and I think from your perspective, Jacob’s story admits the brokenness and the deceit and the lying and the mixed up family dynamics is nothing short of a display of God’s sovereign grace and providence in Jacob’s life and, dare I say, in lives like yours and mine. And so I want you to take up your Bibles as we’re going to read from chapter 28. Before we do that, let’s bow our heads and pray—shall we? Let’s pray.

*Father, we do thank you. This is your Word. We thank you that it has been given to us as the inspired text of Scripture. It speaks into our lives. It is nourishment to our souls. Father, minister to us in grace, we pray, this evening, that your Holy Spirit would pierce us. Teach us. Rebuke us. Correct us and train us in righteousness for Christ’s sake and glory we pray. Amen.*

Genesis 28 and we read from verse 10 and we’re going to read to verses 22. Hear God’s Word:

Jacob left Beersheba and went toward Haran. And he came to a certain place and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, there was a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven. And behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the Lord stood above it and said, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south, and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land. For I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it.” And he was afraid and said, “How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.”

So early in the morning Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel, but the name of the city was Luz at the first. Then Jacob made a vow, saying, “If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”

Praise God for his inerrant and inspired holy Word.

### **The Hound of Heaven: A God Who Relentlessly Pursues with Grace**

Some of you may be familiar with the newspaper cartoon series Calvin & Hobbes. It's about a six-year-old little boy and his stuffed tiger who I think sometimes he thinks is his living pet. Anyway, this one morning Calvin comes rushing down the stairs with Hobbes in hand and rushes into the lounge to where his mom is sitting. And she's sitting in her favorite chair having her early morning cup of coffee, getting ready for the day, trying to get her head around what lies ahead. And as she looks up she sees Calvin and she's both amused and amazed. And as she looks at him, she realizes he's wearing a metal pot as a helmet that morning. And he has a black piece of material on as a cape that goes from his head down his shoulders down his back and its draping on the floor. And in one hand he's got a flashlight. In the other one he has a baseball bat. "What's up Calvin?" "Nothing so far mom." "What do you mean 'so far'?" "Mom, if anything happens today," and it's that point that he turns around and he heads for the door and he says, "I'm going to be ready for it." I use that analogy to say that as much as Jacob thought that he would be ready for the events that we're about to unpack and unfold in his life, there was no way that he would've been ready for the events and for whom he was about to encounter in the dream that night.

You must remember that he's on the run, our friend Jacob. There's a sense, in which, the taking of the blessing from Isaac has been a good thing and yet it has been an absolute disaster from another perspective. Jacob is forced to flee from the murderous hatred of his own brother Esau who is lying in wait back in Beersheba like an angry lion waiting to kill him. In fact, he has stated very clearly that if this man comes here I've had enough of his deceit and I'm going to take him out. Hence he's on the run. But, little does he know that God is also going to use the events that are going to unfold as he reaches Haran to his uncle Laban who is waiting with a spider's net to basically ensnare him and suck the life right out of him. The deceiver is about to be deceived in God's sovereign providence to sort out sanctification in his own life so that he can be of service to the Lord.

And so here's Jacob. He gets the blessing, something that he's been wanting all his life. He gets the blessing and he has to leave every bit of the inheritance behind with his brother Esau. What a twist of events! Who would've thought? And, as he's on the run, he's forced to leave behind everything that is known to him, everything that is familiar, everything that is comfortable and gives him security he has to leave behind him. Even his dear mom, he has to leave behind. Metaphorically, you can imagine it's almost as if the rug has been pulled out from underneath his feet. We go through seasons like that as well--don't we?—where we just kind of wonder, "What is going on here? How is this possible?" And, yet, even as he is fleeing, in this case he is fleeing from the consequences of his sin,

even as he is fleeing from the consequences of his sin he is perfectly within God's sovereign plan for his life. Perfectly within God's sovereign plan for his life. God may never have approved of Jacob's antics or his sinful behavior, but he has used all of the events that Jacob has given himself over to bring him to this place where God may break in in his radiant splendor and glory and change Jacob's life once and for all.

Jesus himself, when he came to earth, his mission was to seek and to save the lost, wasn't it? He breaks into a world that is not seeking for him to seek and to save those who are lost. I want to ask you before we continue into the points that I have for this evening. Think back on your own life. Perhaps it was to those moments before you came to faith. Perhaps it's even as you're seated here this evening as a believer. How many times has God had to chase you down because you'd be running as a result of your sin? You know, one of the Puritans used to call the Holy Spirit and how he chases after the believing community the "hound of heaven." It's a lovely phrase. He never gives up and he chases us down until we're on our knees and we worship him and we're back in the fold. Isn't that what the hymn was all about this evening as well? Are you running from the Lord as you're seated here this evening? What sin has you on the run? The story of Jacob is all about how heaven comes down to earth, isn't it? It's all about how heaven comes down to earth. It's about the enormity of God's free grace that is displayed to rebellious human beings.

And I want to draw your attention to just three aspects, to three brief aspects for this evening. The first one is the voyage. The second one is the vision. And the third one is the "vership." You may be thinking what on earth was that? Well, it's the German pronunciation of worship. I couldn't get another "V." So forgive me for my sins. But, we're going to have a look at voyage, vision, and worship that comes out of this text.

### **The Voyage of God's Providence**

The first thing is the voyage of God's providence. The voyage of God's providence that we're all on. It's not just Jacob, it's every single one of us. The voyage of God's providence. You know, there's a sense in which our passage reminds us of what the psalmist says in Psalm 139 where he says, "Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go to the heavens, or if I make my bed in the depths, or settle up on the far side even there your hand will guide me. Your right hand will hold me fast." You cannot escape from God and we know that. But how often we try. Now I don't think that Jacob was thinking along those lines about where is God in this place. As we read in verses 10, "Jacob departed from Beersheba and went towards Haran." I don't think that he was thinking about the covenant promises and blessings that were actually his because of his grandfather Abraham and Isaac that had come through the line from God himself. I don't think he was thinking as he was going on this voyage, "Wow, I wonder how many memories I'm going to be able to accumulate

on this wonderful scenery out here.” And I also don’t think that he was trying to recall the gospel truths or the covenant truths that his parents had instilled in him from his very birth. In fact, what he was probably wondering was, “How did things get to this point? How did I get here? What happened? Where’s Esau?”

You see at this point Jacob has been traveling for about two days. He’s traveled fifty out of the five-hundred mile journey that still lies ahead of him. That’s a long time to think and reflect, isn’t it? Alone. It’s a long time to reflect with great regret wishing you could turn back the clock. You look at your own life: how many times or how many events have taken place where you just wish you could turn back that moment in your life? After all, it is mouth of God that the “older will serve the younger.” And yet, it is Jacob who had deceitfully decided to steal with his own stupidity and the lack of faith that he had what was not his at that appointed time. And, we’re told, as he’s retracing his grandfather Abraham’s footsteps as he goes to Haran. We’re told that he reaches a certain place. And as he reaches a certain place he takes a rock for his pillow that night and he falls asleep. Now, I think it’s pretty safe to say that Jacob would’ve had a hard time resting that evening. Now, for those of you who have gone to sleep with a burden at some point in your life, you’ll know that there’s a big difference between sleep and rest. You can have eight hours sleep and wake up in the morning feeling as if you’ve had no rest whatsoever. And we’ve all had that at some point or another. You know, from one perspective this passage gives us great insight into the nature of sin and its consequences especially when our sin finds us out, when it catches up with us. Abraham Lincoln is the one, I think, that said you can fool all of the people some of the time, some of the people all of time, but certainly not all of the people all of the time.

### **A Call to Flee Sin and Flee to Christ**

May I just add, you cannot fool God? All sin will be exposed and either you will be covered by the blood of the Lamb in this life as you turn and repent and believe. Or it be exposed in the pure light of his radiant glory and he himself will deal with that in his righteous justice one day.

Those who are outside of Christ are dead in their trespasses and sins. We know that from Scripture. We who are alive to God, however, often think that our sin is going to satisfy us in some way or another. How often do we get a notion or a thought into our mind and think, “That’s something that we must pursue.” And as we pursue it and eventually we catch up with it, it turns around and consumes us. It consumes us. Whether it be the lusts of the world, the lusts of the eyes or the pride of life, we often become consumed by that that we pursue. And what happens is, is it affects, it hurts, it impacts us, our family, our friends, the saints around us, and, more than any of that, it has an impact on our intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ and the relationship that we so dearly love.

### **God’s Appointed Place and God’s Appointed Time**

Coming back to Jacob. In God's providence, brothers and sisters, in his broken, lonely and fearful state, Jacob is perfectly within God's sovereign purpose and plan. And we need to remember that. Amidst everything else that has been happening, this is God's appointed place to break into his life and to bring about a change. Let me just ask you: can you remember that moment when God broke into your life? Do you remember the moments that God continues to break into your life to bring that change?

### **The Vision of Undeserved, Sovereign Grace**

And that brings me to the second part of this evening and that is for us to perhaps reflect upon the vision of undeserved sovereign grace. The vision or the dream that Jacob has that evening. Verses 12 to 15 is where our focus will be here. You know, as we read the passage like this, and I'd ask you to go and read it again as you go away, but the one thing that ought to strike us is the undeserved, un-favored nature of the free grace that God bestows upon this rebellious individual who is fleeing from everything that this world has, everything that he has known. As Jacob's troubled mind and soul drifts off to sleep that night, it's interesting that God now chooses to break. He could've chosen any other moments in Jacob's time, in life to break in with free grace. But, here is Jacob in dreamland. He's no longer grasping. He can no longer deceive. He can no longer justify himself. He can no longer take for himself. It's almost as if God has brought him to that place where he says, "Now observe and listen." Friends, isn't that what we do every time we come to God's Word. It is God saying, "Observe and listen. Listen to what I have to say. And let me break into your life and bring the change so you may honor me with everything that is within you. That you may love me more fully." Verse 12: "And he dreamed and behold there was a lattice set up on the earth. And the top of it reached up to heaven. And behold the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold the Lord stood above it." You know, one can almost imagine at that point that even though he's in dreamland, he's thinking, "Wow! Look at that ladder. Wow! Look at those angels ascending and descending. Wow! Look at the Lord in glory." This was before God has even opened his mouth to speak. Are we at that point where we are truly amazed at who God is? Or have we reduced him to be just another creature made in the figment of our own imagination? Do we know who we are worshipping and dealing with?

### **A God Who Comes to Bring Grace**

You know, some commentators at this point contrast the tower of Babel and the staircase in Jacob's dream. Babel, you remember, was the foolish attempt by rebellious people to try and make their way from earth to the top of the heavens. And, of course, here in the dream it is the ladder coming down from heaven to earth. It's a completely opposite display of the events. You know, in Jacob's dream, one of the things we are taught is that it must be heaven that comes down to earth. Any human attempt that tries to gain eternal matters will fall short.

Heaven must come down. It is heaven that bridges—or it is God that bridges between heaven and earth. It is God who makes a way. It is he that comes to us in grace.

### **A God Who Comes in Christ**

In fact, if you turn with me to the gospel of John. You can maybe do that if you've got your Bibles open you can turn. Otherwise, just make a mental note. But, in John chapter 1, we're actually told in Scripture that Jesus is the matter that is referred to in Jacob's dream. Jesus is busy calling his disciples in John chapter 1 verses 50 and 51. And Philip goes back to Nathaniel and he says, "Nathaniel, we found the Messiah. We found the one that we've been waiting for. And he comes from Nazareth." And Nathaniel foolishly turns around to Philip and says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Anyway, they go to see Jesus and you remember one of Jesus' statements as he says to Nathaniel and the rest of the disciples that are there. He says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the ladder..." No, no, no, "on the Son of Man." "You will see them descending and ascending on the Son of Man." You see, Jesus Christ in his incarnation, in his perfect life, in his atoning sacrifice on Calvary has made the way. In him, heaven has come down to us and it is by grace through faith in Christ alone that we are the hope of eternal glory. What a great message. The ladder in the Old Testament was simply a shadow or a type that was always meant to point us forward to the reality of the circumstances when Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, came to earth, that we would know that he is the way, the truth, and the life, that no one comes to the Father except by me. 1 Timothy 2 goes on a little bit further to say "for there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ." Let me just ask you. As you're seated here, you may have been in the church for many years, but have you truly trusted the Messiah?

### **A God Who Comes to Seek Sinners**

As we read this passage, yes, the vision and details of the vision are great and their glorious and they catch our imagination. But, I want you to hear what John Calvin has to say on this passage. He says that "mute visions are cold." "Mute visions are cold. It is the word of the Lord that is the soul that quickens them." In other words, it's the Word of the Lord that brings life to the situations of our heart. It's the Word of the Lord that actually brings meaning to life. Verse 13: "The Lord stood above it and said, 'I am the LORD the God of Abraham, your father, and the God of Isaac. The land in which you lie, I will give to you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth and you shall spread abroad to the west and east and north and south. And in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed. Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. For I will never leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'" I think that at that point there were no words from Jacob's mouth. That's a staggering statement of grace. You

know, the one thing that caught my attention was that none of the statements, "Shame on you Jacob. How could you do that to your father or to your son? What do you think your mother is going through right now?" None of that. No reminding him of his years of stealing and lying and deceit and the treachery that goes along with that. He was trying to capture him by a vision of the hope that lies ahead. Not to pass over the sin, but for him to realize that as he comes and as he trusts the past will find forgiveness and that his hope is from that day forward in God and God alone. God is sovereign, friends. This is displayed so wonderfully in this passage. If God had not sought Jacob out, he would've continued running. We, also, were born not seeking God. We are all like sheep who have gone astray. Each of us is served to do things his or her own way. If God had not sought you out, you would still be seeking and you would still be lost, friends. Free grace, undeserved, unmerited, un-favored grace that is displayed to us. This is the genius of the gospel, by the way. This is the genius of the gospel: that it is God who comes down to us and meets us in our rebellious state and he takes us and promises us home. That mansion in the sky that Jesus speaks about.

Just very, very quickly--I want you to notice in the statement that God makes in this dream to Jacob. There are three things that I think that he is dealing with regards to the past, the present and the future of Jacob.

### **God's Providential Care over Jacob's Past**

And the first thing is that I want you to see that God reminds Jacob of his covenant promises to those who are in the covenant line. He reminds Jacob of the covenant promises to those who are in the covenant line. Verse 13: "I am the Lord, the God of Abraham and Isaac. The land on which you lie I will give you and to your offspring. Your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth and in you and your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed." You know, if Jacob wasn't sleeping a moment in time, I think he would've been thinking he's dreaming. Those are the words of the covenant. He would've heard that from his own mother as he was being nurtured from early years. Here's essentially God securing him and assuring him that, "Yes, you snatched that which was not yours to snatch, but you are truly the heir of Abraham and Isaac. And these promises are for you." He's dealing with everything that has passed in Jacob's life.

### **God's Providential Care over Jacob's Present**

The second thing that I just want to draw your attention to is that God was, is and will continue to lead his life providentially, verse 15. He was leading his life. He is leading his life now. And he will continue to lead his life in his providence. Verse 15: "Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land." "Jacob, I am your provider. I know that at this moment in time you have nothing. But trust me, I have promised to give you land and descendants." We know that our ultimate mansion is the mansion in the sky

when we pass through the final enemy of death when we go to be with the Lord. The mansion is being prepared for us. Descendants, I want to encourage you if you are parents or grandparents: are you training up your children and your grandchildren in the fear and admonition of the Lord? Leave a heritage for the next generation or the generation thereafter.

### **God's Providential Care over Jacob's Future**

And then, thirdly, I want to draw your attention to God promises Jacob that he will protect him from this time forth. So, he's dealing with the past, the present and will protect you now and from this time forth and God promises Jacob that he will protect him from this time forth. Verse 15: "For I will not leave you until I've done what I promised." "You're not alone Jacob. You may think that you're alone, Jacob, but you're not alone." Friends, what are the circumstances of your life right now? You feel that God has maybe abandoned you. You feel alone. And you need to be reminded this evening that God is right here in the midst and he's protecting you. He's taking care of you. He's nourishing you and nurturing your soul as a child of the covenant in Christ Jesus. And so as the Lord comes to Jacob, as God comes to each and every one of us, in this place, through his Word, as he offers grace to forgive and as he gives protection and offers provision, he captures our hearts and our minds with this hope of glory, doesn't he?

### **The Worship of A Great and Glorious God**

And there is only one way to respond to all of this. The only way to respond is to take delight in worshipping. To take delight in worshipping. Verses 16 to 22. And, I'm not going to say too much on this. It's a sermon in itself, actually. But, I do want you to notice that when God meets us, when he brings a change to our eternal soul, it must and it will result in the bowing of our lives before him in worship. We can do no other when we are confronted with the enormity of this kind of grace. Jacob awakes in a state of fear and amazement that morning. "How awesome is this place," he says, "This is the house of God, the gate of heaven." It's almost as if these things can't come out quick enough. And he proceeds to turn his pillow into a pillar. In an act of worship, he "raises his Ebenezer," so to speak, and he anoints it with oil, makes a vow and lays down his life and his belongings to the Lord God Almighty. Friends, what is it that you're keeping back from God? Not that you're just running from, but what is it that you're keeping back from the Lord? You see, grace is meant to usher forth our worship. It's meant to usher forth true worship in each of our lives.

### **Grace for the Weak and Wounded, Sick and Sore**

I want to just simply conclude by perhaps asking a couple of questions. Brothers and sisters, are there spiritual realities that you're striving to grasp with your own strength and wisdom? Are you clamoring after the covenant blessings and the

covenant promises that you're going up the stairs of Babel? Perhaps, you're worn out because you're busy fleeing from your sin this evening. And your flight from your sin is leaving you worn out, desperate, and you know all the other emotions that go along with that. Perhaps, some of you are feeling overwhelmed by life's circumstances this evening. You may be feeling that you're on the verge of a mental collapse. You may be very ill. You may be misunderstood, abandoned, discouraged. Then, I want to remind you what's at the very heart of this text: that God in his providence has you here and he is with you. He is with you. Come to God through his appointed means. Enter the door of the crucified Savior. Throw yourself in your complete reliance upon him and you'll find mercy and grace, abounding mercy and grace. Far more than you'll ever begin to imagine. And you'll taste that the Lord is good. And then remember. Please remember what the Lord has done. Because as we remember—and we forget so quickly as human beings—but when we remember what the Lord has done, it will drive us to him in an act of worship with each new day. Cling to your Savior and worship him. He is worthy.

Let's bow our heads and pray, shall we?

*Lord God Most High, we thank you for precious passages like this one in the Old Testament. Stories that we've heard time and time and time again. And it speaks so magnificently and wonderfully of the beauty of your amazing grace, a grace that has touched each and every one of our lives and continues to do so. Father, we do pray that you would help us and teach us what it means to throw ourselves into the everlasting hands of the Merciful God. Father, you know the circumstances of each one that is seated here this evening. Lord, meet with us we pray. Reach us. Strengthen us. Draw us ever closer to yourself that we may truly love you, that our hearts may be quenched in the river of life and that our soul will hunger no more. Father, bless us as we continue in our time of prayer this evening, that the name of Jesus Christ may be lifted on high, that you may be exalted and that your glory will shine across the whole earth. We pray this in Christ's name, Amen.*

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